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Hungering for a New Politics: Gerald Vandezande's Reformational Gifts to Politics



by John Hiemstra

Gerald Vandezande was a towering figure in Christian political action in Canada, and he also had significant contacts and influence in the USA and the Netherlands. He considered himself a Christian in the Kuyperian tradition and acknowledged Christ as Lord and center of life. He was deeply reformational, having been heavily influenced in early life by Professor H. Evan Runner, a philosophy professor at Calvin College. Yet, amazingly, Christians

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from all faith traditions and within every political party consulted, debated, quoted, and often admired Gerald. In policy development and advocacy, he collaborated with Evangelical, Ecumenical, and Roman Catholic Christians, as well as with inter-faith groups and political partisans of all stripes. He received the prestigious Order of Canada in 2001, citing his "powerful and respected voice for social justice." Gerald Vandezande passed away July 16, 2011: His public-justice work is sorely missed.

But what exactly was Gerald Vandezande's contribution? Strikingly, he was first and foremost an activist, not a political philosopher or academic, as leaders generally are in the Reformational tradition. Gerald didn't attend university during World War II Europe, not having that opportunity, but he intuitively and dynamically grasped Christian social and political thought. Since he published only a handful of articles and books, it is difficult today to figure out what made him such an effective and engaging Christian in politics. This article identifies several key features of Gerald's contribution by offering a short reflection on his influences on me. It shares the gems of insight many of us received from him over the years. This is not an overview of Gerald's life story and accomplishments; you can find that in an excellent story in *Faith Today*.¹

A friend and mentor

Gerald Vandezande first caught my attention when

he spoke at Dordt College, where I was a student between 1974 and 1978. He became a friend, colleague, and mentor to me over the years and taught me a great deal about *doing* public justice. His deep and expansive Christian vision—and dynamic grasp of the Reformational tradition of social and political philosophy—drew me in. I had the privilege of working alongside him for six years in Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), a Christian organization he co-founded in Canada (with John Olthuis and others). Later, we worked together on a variety of policy-advocacy projects, as I served on the board of CPJ for which he worked. We continued to stay in regular contact over the last twenty years when, as a professor of political studies at the King's University College, I drew him and his case studies into my political science courses. Astonishingly, each time Gerald spoke, he gave us new and fascinating things to learn! From my experience, here are several of Gerald Vandezande's reformational gifts to politics.

Anti-intellectualism

Gerald's anti-intellectualism challenged and critiqued the reformational philosophical and theological tradition, which has produced a variety of very valuable insights into social, economic and political life. I was fortunate to have received first-class training in these ideas while at Dordt College. When I started to publicly engage policy issues, however, I was puzzled that several friends criticized my approach. I thought it reflected the best of reformational thinking. Eventually, it was Gerald who helped me recognize the pitfalls of intellectualism in my policy-making approach.

Intellectualism is a temptation and challenge for all theoretical communities, not just the reformational tradition. In a nutshell, the problem of intellectualism in policy-making goes something like this. A policy problem is identified and analyzed by being lifted and abstracted from its complex, real-life setting. Theory and distinctions are used to understand the problem. Christian principles are then applied to these abstract conclusions in order to shape and construct a Christian policy solution. This solution is then brought back into the integral, practical reality of everyday life and policy debate and advocated as the best solution. Too of-

ten, however, in spite of some strong insights, the intellectualism of this approach produces either an inappropriately abstract or disengaged policy solution or, worse, gets side-tracked in philosophizing and never actually gets around to constructing or advocating a concrete policy option at all.

Strikingly, he was first and foremost an activist, not a political philosopher or academic, as leaders generally are in the reformational tradition.

While speaking at Dordt in the mid-1970s, Gerald discussed CPJ's (Canada) approach to the northern Mackenzie Valley Pipeline debate that was raging in Canada.² While clearly enriched and deepened by reformational thinking, I saw CPJ working with a dynamic and engaging approach, not intellectualism, to tackle the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline debate. I was hooked! CPJ tackled this problem in such a way that their concrete policy solutions, based on an integral, biblically-based vision, could actually be adopted by the government. Significantly, Gerald also opposed intellectualism in other areas of life, including scholarship, labour relations, and theology.

Discerning the deeper religious visions

Gerald's anti-intellectualism was based on his belief that intellectualism fails to adequately discern the deeper ideological and religious convictions that contribute to, or shape, public problems and solutions. The reformational tradition is well known for suggesting that "life is religion." Gerald emphasized this point practically by arguing that in all projects, we need to ask, "Where are things going?" "Where are people taking their projects and developments?" "What is the deeper, underlying thrust of a particular development?"

That deeper, underlying trust often involves ideologies. Ideologies—or "isms," as Gerald liked to refer to them—are a species of religion. Ideologies

become pseudo-religions when people expect “too much from a good thing.” Ideologies spring into life when we become obsessed with achieving a good “goal” (in “God’s good creation,” he would say). This obsession drives us to confer far too much power and leeway on the “means” we choose to achieve this goal. We then end up spinning ideologies—collections of words, stories and explanations—to rationalize and justify the distorted and unjust actions (means) we take to achieve the goal. Since life is religion, Gerald argued, we need to be constantly alert and discerning about whether, and how, ideologies may be directing and shaping our behaviours, structures, and policies.

Living intimately with Scripture

Gerald lived closely with Scripture and in prayer. His faith inspired him to oppose dead-end ideologies in daily public-affairs work. While he rejected the idea that quoting Scripture makes policy advocacy “Christian,” he often used Scripture in his speeches. When communicating in certain types of public events, he insisted, we must show the audience why and how we arrived at the specific vision and policies we are advocating. He called this a form of “structural evangelism.” For example, his use of Psalm 146 at the end of his book *Justice Not Just Us* reverberates with, and deepens, the public-policy arguments made throughout the book.³

At the heart of Gerald’s reading of Scripture was the idea of a “Way” orientation. Scripture is not a set of moral rules or abstract doctrines or rationalist principles. Rather, Scripture is the liberating meta-narrative of the Gospel that points out the “Way.” The story of redemption is a “Way” to walk, a “Way” of faithfulness and healing in God’s creation. As Gerald’s close friend Bob Goudzwaard says [in a video address at the memorial service], Scripture offers our lives direction; it marks out “sign posts” to guide our daily social and political living, to keep us on the right course. In another context Bob puts it this way: in the Old Testament the “Torah means first and foremost a path to walk on, a ‘direction’, a route secure from harm. It is the path along which blessings come.”⁴

This understanding of Scripture led Gerald to steer clear of any approach to policy that involved working out a static, detailed blue-print for action.

In his words,

My intent is not to provide a social handbook, an economic blueprint, or a political manual that pretends to give all the answers. Rather, I attempt to outline a Christian view of social, economic, and political responsibility that will enable us to respond to the crisis of our times with hope and vision. I do so from the conviction that the message of God’s creation and Christ’s incarnation is good news and of crucial significance for our everyday life.⁵

For him, the “Way” orientation of Scripture provides a truly relevant and dynamic guide for steering us in and through the concrete struggles and circumstances of life, including political life.

Importance of structural analysis

Alongside his emphasis on faith and Scripture as key motivators in policy-making, Gerald also reminded us that it is critical to analyze the structures and systems that **cause** the problems we try to tackle, whether poverty, inequality, family breakdown, religious oppression, or exploitation. We should not attribute these problems exclusively to flawed vision, wrong beliefs, lack of personal responsibility, or false motives. Structures and systems have the power to profoundly influence our lives, precisely because at some earlier point, deeper human beliefs and visions have shaped them. Deformed and oppressive structures and systems can cause massive problems in society. Thus, he argued, we should engage in an “architectonic critique” of structures.⁶ Engaging policy problems needs to involve both analysis of structures and systems and concurrent probing of the deeper faith and ideological motivations.

When in politics, act politically!

Gerald was a master at *politics* and profoundly grasped what it takes to do politics well. When Christian communities face a secular public square, they often tend towards one of three responses: (i) acquiesce and pull out, (ii) acquiesce and participate in politics as though it were a common neutral realm, or, (iii) challenge neutral secularism with robust Christian reflection and discernment of issues. While favouring the latter approach, Gerald warned that it too had dangers if we simply formed Christian political organizations and publicly de-

clared Christian principles in response to problems. Rather, he believed we need to challenge neutral secularism by *doing* politics!

In class, I tell my students that politics is the *activity* of persuading people to support or dissuading people from supporting a common public project or law, often led by a government. By its nature, politics is a rapidly unfolding, dynamic process. Many issues and problems are tackled simultaneously, and often there is only a brief window of opportunity to engage in the politics of a particular issue before politicians move on, either addressing or shelving the issue. While Christian principles and theoretical frameworks for society and politics are critical, Gerald argued, they should not displace or side-track genuine, ongoing engagement with

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politics and policy-making. Too often, he warned, Christian communities put the development of Christian principles and the theoretical reflection on political reality ahead of the hard work of political action, and thus they fail to do politics. The health and wellbeing of our neighbours depend on a just shaping of policy through active politics.

Activism is a dead end

While emphasizing action, Gerald also repeatedly encouraged justice activists not to slip into a spirit of “activism,” and thereby burn out. Activism suggests an attitude that the outcomes of our work depend solely on us. Ultimately, he advised, the antidote for activism is the recognition that our action simply joins in, and follows, the work God-in-Christ is already doing to renew creation and life.

Sphere sovereignty, or differentiated responsibility

Central to Gerald’s Christian social and political thinking was the principle of “sphere sovereignty,” which he often referred to as “differentiated responsibility.” (This principle is similar to the notion of subsidiarity in Catholic social thought.) Basically, it suggests that the various associations and institutions of society are shaped and tasked by God differently in order to accomplish unique functions required by society. I learned from Gerald that this principle is only one of several principles at work in societal life, and thus it needs to be dynamically balanced with others such as “the interconnectedness of social life,” “solidarity,” and the “common good.”

Furthermore, Gerald emphasized that “differentiated responsibility” must be understood dynamically, not statically. Different spheres of life—family, business, unions, schools, government, and so forth—should not be seen as autonomous or untouchable spheres, surrounded by unbridgeable boundaries. This is how liberal ideology portrays them when it poses a “wall of separation” between church and state, or a “wall of separation” between the free market and government. The notion of unbridgeable boundaries between spheres leads to distortions and a static understanding of society. Rather, Gerald argued that sphere sovereignty means that the central calling and task of an institution come from God, and since they do, the institution’s primary responsibility is to respond to that calling and task. However, should a sphere/institution fail to perform its task or abuse it or oppress others, then other appropriate institutions—including the state—have the duty to “interfere” in the name of justice and to enable and restore this calling and task.

Public justice approach

At the heart of Gerald’s political ministry was the idea that God calls government to a specific type of justice, namely, “public justice.” He contrasts public justice to types of justice practiced in other areas of life, e.g., family justice, justice within business, ecclesiastical justice, educational justice, and so forth. In light of the principle of “differentiated responsibility,” Gerald also stressed that citizens and other political office-holders in the political

sphere should always be busy discerning the nature of government's public-justice task for each time and place. In fact, it is a Christian duty to engage fellow politicians and citizens in the process of discerning government's distinct role in areas such as eradicating poverty, accommodating pluralism, or pursuing ecological justice.

The heart of government's public justice role, Gerald argued, is the God-given calling to balance, harmonize, and publicly-legally integrate the public claims of people, communities, and organizations so that they might flourish together within societal and ecological systems. Governments carry out this role through laws, policies, and programs that they develop based on public debate. Gerald was instrumental in helping Citizens for Public Justice (Canada) devise the *Guidelines for Public Justice*. These guidelines—including, human dignity, mutual responsibility, economic equity, social justice, environmental integrity, and fiscal fairness⁷—were meant as a contribution to discerning government's public justice task of harmonizing people, communities, organizations and ecosystems within the “common good.”

From issue-oriented to integrated policy

Another insight Gerald bequeathed us was the idea that we need to engage in integrated policy-making. We often use the term “issue” to focus on a policy action, and Gerald did too. But, he increasingly rejected an issue-oriented approach to policy analysis and advocacy. While an issue-oriented approach helped us focus on concrete problems rather than stalling out on abstract theories, such an approach also runs the danger of encouraging us to tackle problems in isolation. In reality, problems frequently emerge out of a coherent “way of life” in the interconnected whole of everyday reality. Truly effective solutions require us to understand how these problems are intertwined with, as well as impact, other areas or “issues” of life. Gerald's integral policy-making approach grew out of a multi-dimensional understanding of reality, based on his belief that all of creation and history cohere in Christ (Col 1).

Broad agenda

Gerald avoided developing a single-issue political

organization, as the campaign mentality in the Christian community so often produces, e.g. the temperance or abortion movements. His public-justice vision led him to advocate a general political organization (CPJ) that works on a broad agenda. While happy to tackle problems as diverse as abortion, peace, ecology, family and economic issues, Gerald believed that a Christian public philosophy offers healing solutions for a wide range of public problems. He actively tackled problems across the political spectrum, such as, poverty; religious freedom; justice for aboriginal First Nations [Native-Americans]; ecological sustainability; defining marriage; multi-cultural and multi-faith justice; pluralistic school policy; economic justice and sufficiency; social equity, inclusion and solidarity; and many more.

Guidelines for Socio-economic Responsibility

Gerald strongly believed that God's norms, discerned in the good creation through the light of Scripture, must guide and shape all human decision-making if we are to flourish. We must not ignore norms, pay attention to only favourite norms (e.g. efficiency), or twist their inner content. Norms and values should not be after thoughts but must function as effective guides and starting points for living. Healthy social, economic and political practice depends on faithful listening to norms and values. Furthermore, *all* norms and values must be responded to *simultaneously* in our daily life decisions.

Citizens for Public Justice's (Canada) “Guidelines for Socio-economic responsibility”⁸ were the outcome of a process of reflecting on how norms might shape socio-economic decision-making. These guidelines stimulated fresh and exciting thinking about how values might guide living and policy in many NGOs that cooperated with CPJ. I have often used these guidelines in my university courses with great success.

Always a positive agenda

Gerald had an amazingly positive attitude to politicians and public life. While he is well-known for prophetic critique and passionate speeches, his biggest emphasis was to encourage people to frame their critique around a positive solution. His favourite phrase for describing this approach was “ex-

pose, oppose, propose”!

Openness to learning from other traditions

Gerald’s approach to other faith traditions was complex. He believed government must deal justly with all *bone fide* faith groups in society, that is, all groups that do not promote violence or the overthrow of society or advocate religious or racial hatred. Government policies dealing with difference and plurality in society, he argued, must “do justice to all and discriminate against none.”

The belief in God’s good creation and common grace, however, also led him to emphasize that we can learn from other faiths, traditions, and movements who share life in God’s creation. For me, Gerald modeled a bold approach to open but faith-grounded dialogue. He borrowed widely from various Christian traditions, including liberation theology, just peacemaking, subsidiarity, social gospel, evangelical social action, and the common good. But his deepest convictions also led him to openly engage and discerningly borrow from various non-Christian faith groups and secular movements. They too discover truth as they live under God’s benevolent and patient care for creation.

Policy coalitions across interfaith/inter-ideological lines

There are healthy and unhealthy ways of cooperating across ideological, faith, and partisan lines. Gerald modeled a healthy form, in which coalitions become possible if the practical aims, policy goals, or agenda items of various groups overlap. When policy-overlap occurs, a window of opportunity opens to shape a coalition around these specific points. Respectful cooperation works when each group is able to arrive at these common positions from out of its own faith convictions and reasoning.

Policy coalitions will unravel or collapse, however, if they do not limit the scope of their actions to the overlapping agreement and do not respect the distinctive reasoning by which various coalition participants arrive at these common positions. An unhealthy coalition will insist that all member groups agree on a deeper foundation for cooperation, forcing them to accept a common secular or rationalist basis. This requirement threatens the unique starting points and identities of the cooperating groups.

Conclusion

The policy outcomes of Gerald’s creative vision and persistent advocacy are still a benefit to many Canadians. Many involved in public offices and political vocations still reflect on having been blessed by his wise counsel and support. Personally, I am deeply thankful for Gerald’s friendship, vision, and practical public ministry. His mentorship was truly a gift of grace in my political and academic work.

Not all of the above points are original to Gerald, and he would not have claimed so. But they certainly embody a distinctive style and approach to public-justice advocacy and ministry. As such, they were Gerald’s reformatory gifts to politics and public life. His insights and actions continue to hold promise for making our political actions more faithfully and distinctly Christian—and effective.

Endnotes

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3. Gerald Vandezande, *Christians in the Crisis: Toward Responsible Citizenship* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1983).
4. Bob Goudzwaard, Mark Vander Vennen, David Van Heemst, *Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises*, Foreword by Desmond Tutu (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 229n. 1.
5. Gerald Vandezande, *Christians in the Crisis*, 15.
6. This phrase is borrowed from Abraham Kuyper. See Abraham Kuyper, *The Problem of Poverty*, ed. James W. Skillen (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Baker, 1991).
7. Gerald Vandezande, *Justice Not Just Us: Faith Perspectives and National Priorities*, ed. Mark VanderVennan (Public Justice Resource Centre, 1999), 55.
8. See Gerald Vandezande, *Justice Not Just Us*, pp. 87-8.